United Nations A/AC.198/2004/L.2

General Assembly

Distr.: Limited
4 May 2004

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-sixth session
26 April-7 May 2004
Agenda item 8
Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session

Draft report

Chapter III
General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil (on behalf of the Community of Portuguese-speaking countries and the Rio Group), Burkina Faso, Colombia, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ireland (on behalf of the European Union), Israel, Jamaica (on behalf of the Caribbean Community), Japan, Monaco, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, Romania, Senegal, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, the United Republic of Tanzania, the United States of America, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen. Statements were also made by two observers: Cape Verde and Qatar (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China).

2. The general debate was preceded by statements made by the Chairman of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Department of Public Information.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, most speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, noted that the Department assumed the important task of projecting the image of the United Nations to the public, of explaining its role and showing the impact of its actions. The challenge for the Department, he emphasized, was not only to ensure a wider outreach of communications strategies, but also to contribute to the concretization of the goals and objectives of the United Nations as set out in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the medium-term plan. The work of the Department would, therefore, be guided to achieving these goals

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and objectives, in particular, to promoting priority development issues, such as poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS, dialogue among civilizations and cultures, sustainable development and the needs of African countries, he said.

4. Another speaker, pointing out the important role the Department played in promoting the broader goals of the Organization, said that in today's "monopolized world of media", it was crucial in bringing accurate information to the attention of people worldwide. Another speaker, who described the Department of Public Information as a conduit for the flow of information between the United Nations and people of the world, said that by combating biased information of all kinds in the world's communication matrix, the Department could lead the march towards harmony within its own sphere of influence — the domain of information. Another speaker, calling on the Department to maintain its focus on areas of specific interest for developing countries and countries with economies in transition, asked to publicize the results of the Chernobyl disaster.

5. Several speakers said they attached great importance to the commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, which in 2004 was observed at United Nations Headquarters on 3 May. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, reiterated its commitment to a free press and its important role in a free society. She regretted that in many countries press freedom did not exist and the dissemination of information was controlled and limited. She reminded the Committee that freedom of opinion and expression was a right set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this context, she recalled that the Department had renamed its training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries in honour of Reham al-Farra, a Department of Public Information staff member who was killed along with 21 others in the attack on United Nations headquarters in Baghdad in 2003. Her death, and the loss of so many other talented media personnel and journalists, was a sobering reminder of the cost of freedom of expression, she underlined.

6. A number of speakers commended the Department for implementing its annual training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries, which contributed to the promotion of capacity-building in developing countries as well as in countries in transition.

7. Another speaker noted that one of the indispensable conditions for information to play its role in society was freedom of expression, which was essential for the consolidation of a new world information order. It was regrettable that in exercising that basic freedom, some excesses were committed. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press should be exercised with total responsibility and in a constructive spirit, the speaker stressed.

8. Several speakers referred to the role of the Committee on Information vis-à-vis the Department of Public Information and emphasized the importance of constructive interaction between the Department of Public Information and the Committee. According to one speaker, who spoke on behalf of a large group, this engagement was essential to ensure that the shared objectives of providing quality and focused information service to the United Nations family and to the wider public were met. One speaker, recalling that the Committee on Information had been established as the forum to formulate a cogent and coherent information policy for the world which could bring about harmony, goodwill and greater understanding among peoples by building bridges between various societies, cultures, religions and

regions, regretted that the Committee had little gains and few achievements to report. The story of dwindling understanding between religions, cultures and ideologies reflected a less than optimistic picture, he underlined.

9. Referring to the growing digital divide between developed and developing countries, several speakers called for greater efforts by the international community and the Department of Public Information to close that gap. One speaker commented that, as a result of the inequality in the use of information and communications technologies, the disparity between the developed and developing countries in the field of public information had widened. Certain countries, he asserted, continued to take advantage of those imbalances, and had encroached on the sovereignty and interests of other countries. Some countries were taking advantage of their monopoly of modern communications to distort the reality of the developing countries, he said.

10. A number of speakers discussed the outcome of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, which was held in Geneva in December 2003, and referred to the second phase of the Summit, which would be held in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005. Welcoming the holding of the Geneva phase of the Summit, a number of speakers said the Tunis phase should come up with concrete initiatives at all levels to bridge the digital divide and to place information and communications technologies at the service of development. He called on the Department of Public Information to contribute to raising the international community's awareness of the Summit's importance and the need to join efforts to make it a success. Another speaker, expressing similar views, noted that the digital divide could only be closed with the presence of the requisite political will, which was referred to in Africa as "digital solidarity". She hoped that the Tunis phase of the World Summit would be able to make a major contribution to promoting access to technology for all.

11. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, referred to the Secretary-General's report on the continuing reorientation of the Department of Public Information (A/AC.198/2004/2) and expressed her group's satisfaction with the process of reorientation set out in the report. Welcoming the broad-based restructuring that had been implemented, she noted that, with a new organizational structure, mission statement and operating model, the Department had the tools it needed to carry out its activities in a focused and effective manner. She also welcomed the Department's new strategic direction, which included a new client-oriented approach, greater system-wide coordination and the embedding of a culture of evaluation into its work.

12. Another speaker commended the Department for doing a good job, often under difficult circumstances during the last year. He noted with satisfaction that the Department had made progress in implementing its reforms, notably its new client-oriented approach. That positive approach must allow for the establishment of closer ties between the public and the Organization by making its actions and policies more comprehensible. A number of speakers commended the Department for reaching out to targeted audiences, such as NGOs, research institutions, libraries and academic institutions. Another speaker urged the Department to focus on further reinforcing partnerships with Governments, as well as on building bridges with civil society and non-governmental organizations.

13. Speaking on behalf of a large group, one speaker welcomed the progress achieved by the Department since the commencement of the reorientation exercise in enhancing the performance and effectiveness of the Department in accordance with the mandate established by the General Assembly and the recommendations of the Committee on Information. The restructuring of the Department had added impetus to the work of the Department and had resulted in the delivery of targeted and focused information on the United Nations, noted another speaker, who also spoke on behalf a large group. The adoption of a client-oriented approach in the Department's interaction with other Secretariat departments was commended by one speaker, who noted his particular appreciation for the fact that the Department had already established formal relationships with 24 client departments and that 30 communications strategies had been concluded with them.

14. Referring to the new culture of evaluation adopted by the Department, one speaker welcomed the completion of the first annual programme impact review and the formulation of 170 performance indicators, which would enable programme managers to assess their activities. Another speaker, while welcoming the continuing promotion and refinement of a culture of evaluation and performance management, cautioned that data collection, valuable as it was to any evaluation exercise, could not be the only index of performance management. There must be simultaneous emphasis on data analysis and possible adaptation of that analysis to improve the system, he said. He also observed that the emphasis on data collection should not be to the detriment of the day-to-day work of programme managers.

15. Several delegations, focusing on the activities of the report of the Secretary-General on the modernization and integrated management of United Nations libraries (A/AC.198/2004/4), praised the efforts of the Department to improve the services of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and its depository libraries. The training programmes for the librarians of United Nations depository libraries to enhance their capacity for information management and development was also highlighted by a speaker. Concerning the modernization and integrated management of libraries, one speaker took note of the results of the work carried out by the Steering Committee established to follow the question. They constituted a good basis for the realization of the goal of improving the efficiency of the United Nations library system, he said. Another speaker noted that, now that the Steering Committee had completed its organizational phase, he looked forward to the achievement of concrete results that would enable United Nations system libraries to more efficiently meet the needs of their diverse clientele.

16. A number of delegates referred to the report of the Secretary-General on better publicizing the work and decisions of the General Assembly (A/AC.198/2004/6). Welcoming the recommendations contained in the report to publicize the work and decisions of the General Assembly, one speaker encouraged the Department to establish a working relationship with the Office of the General Assembly President. Another speaker, echoing those views, said a better dissemination of the work and decisions of the General Assembly was imperative, and elaborating a communications strategy to do so would be a positive development. Another speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, also commended the Department's efforts to better publicize the work and decisions of the General Assembly, but he added that further efforts were required to make the Assembly's work more visible to the wider public. That could be best assisted through the adoption of an approach which made the Assembly's work more attractive and accessible. Such an approach,

he asserted, might need to be augmented by the requisite human and financial resources, including the placement of the necessary staff in the Office of the President of the Assembly.

17. Several speakers singled out the United Nations web site as an effective medium for dissemination of information about the United Nations. One speaker, representing a large group, noted that the web site continued to register an increasing number of hits, which was a reflection of the relevance of the work of the United Nations, and the wide public interest in its activities across the globe. She welcomed the efforts of the Department to make the web site more relevant through the use of innovations such as live webcasts of important debates and meetings. Another speaker, also representing a large group, while expressing support and appreciation for the Department's work to strengthen the United Nations web site in all official languages, expressed concern at the "increasing gap" among web sites in different official languages. More resources should be allocated to achieve equality among all official languages, he said, and urged that, in order to bridge the current gap, the Department should take into account the specificity of some languages which used non-Latin and bi-directional scripts. Another speaker, referring to the continuing imbalance in the capacities of the web site in the different languages, cited the example of the Arabic site, which he said required further improvement so it might satisfy the needs of Arabic-speaking visitors.

18. However, presenting a different view, another speaker underlined that, in light of its limited resources, the Department would not be able to undertake all of the proposed improvements to the web site simultaneously. The Department should, therefore, give greater priority to deepening and enlarging the capacity of the web site in those major languages that currently received the most traffic. Another speaker, while commending the Department for endeavouring to achieve parity in the use of the six official languages on the United Nations web site, especially the enhancement of the multilingual News Centre web portal and its efforts to expand its capacity to provide webcasts in official languages, argued that multilingualism, as defined in this context, did not equate with universality. The six official languages, for example, were spoken by approximately 40 per cent of first-language speakers worldwide. Considering that the Official Document System was expected to be made freely available to the public during the fourth quarter of 2004 through its integration with the United Nations web site, he questioned whether the use of human and financial resources to try to achieve language parity on the web site was justified in the light of the other priorities of the Organization.

19. Several speakers argued that in spite of increasing technological progress, the traditional means of communication, such as radio, remained vital, particularly in developing countries, where access to more advanced forms of communication was still far from satisfactory. Describing radio as the cheapest and the most accessible means of communication in his subregion, one speaker urged that necessary funds be made available to the Department to sustain the live radio project, which had been made an integral part of the Department's activities. Another speaker, referring to the importance of radio for the least developed Portuguese-speaking countries, asked the Department to strengthen United Nations Radio's Portuguese unit.

20. A number of speakers cited the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Communications Group (A/AC.198/2004/5) and commended the Department for its leadership role within the Group. One speaker,

citing an example of the successful proactive efforts of the Group, noted its coordinated efforts to promote greater interest in and awareness of issues concerning African development, including the information provided on the Third Tokyo International Conference on African Development. He also noted with appreciation the involvement of the Group in drawing greater public awareness to Expo 2005 Aichi, Japan, for which the Group had formed a consultative group. Another speaker suggested the formation of a regional component of the Communications Group, which he argued would help reach out to various national audiences.

21. Several speakers discussed the vital links between public information and the United Nations peacekeeping operations. One speaker, representing a large group of countries, welcomed the efforts of the Department to develop a strategy to publicize new peacekeeping missions, particularly in Africa. Saying that United Nations peacekeeping operations had assumed paramount importance against the backdrop of an international era beset with conflict, another speaker said information components of peacekeeping operations had a vital role to play in forging proper understanding of the mission's objectives and capabilities. The Department should continue its efforts to strengthen its capacity through the development of a coherent information strategy with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, he said. One speaker, referring to a certain gap that existed between public perceptions about peacekeeping operations and the current reality, argued that the preparation and dissemination of a message on United Nations peacekeeping operations must be part of the Department's priorities. Another speaker emphasized that there was a greater need than ever to develop a comprehensive public information strategy on peacekeeping operations to ensure the greatest public impact.

22. The report of the Secretary-General on the rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres (A/AC.198/2004/3), drew the attention of most speakers. One speaker, who described the establishment of the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels on 30 January 2004 as part of the Secretary-General's rationalization process as being of particular significance to the members of the group of countries she represented, welcomed the proposed model for regionalization of United Nations information centres. Another speaker noted that, following the first phase of establishing the Brussels regional centre, it was now necessary to move into the second phase — to channel all the resources saved from the closing down of nine national centres to support the information activities of the United Nations in developing countries. Another speaker, saying that the Secretary-General, in his report submitted for consideration by the Committee, had convincingly explained the need to reorganize the information centre system, urged that the hands of the Secretariat not be tied but that countries work with it to effect this long-overdue reorganization.

23. Several other speakers presented views on the rationalization process. One speaker, representing a large group, observed that it was premature to present proposals on further regionalization. The United Nations information centres played a significant role in disseminating information and in promoting public awareness of and mobilizing support for the Organization's work, he said. Enough time should be given to examine the results and possible added value of the creation of the Western European hub before presenting any new proposals, which should take into account, among other things, the existing differences in information technology and communications between Western Europe and other regions of the developing world. He emphasized the need to allocate adequate resources for the effective

functioning and strengthening of the United Nations information centres in developing countries.

24. One speaker, arguing for maintaining the information centre in the country he represented, wondered if it was logical to close information centres at a time when the Organization was being misunderstood. Another speaker cautioned that reform of the Department and rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres should not be implemented simply for the purpose of achieving budget savings for the Department. Another speaker, citing the example of the information centre hosted by his country, said that given the fact that developing countries were lagging behind in access to information technology, the closure of the centre there would only deepen the lack of information about the United Nations in the subregion his country belonged to. Saying that his Government had provided the centre with premises free of charge, partly paid its telephone bills and fully covered its water and electricity bills, he argued that the centre's overall cost was almost insignificant compared to the activities it carried out. Expressing similar views, another speaker urged caution before applying the idea of establishing regional hubs. Due consideration should be accorded to the specific needs of different countries, particularly in countries with underdeveloped communication infrastructure and systems. Otherwise, these changes would jeopardize the objectives of the Committee and the mandate of the Department, she noted. Several other speakers referred to the costs shared by their Governments in hosting United Nations information centres in their countries and highlighted the advantages of United Nations information centres in their own countries and in countries they served.

25. Another speaker, referring to the report of the Secretary-General on the rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres, wanted to know why certain Member States had been excluded from their services. He was not fully persuaded by the proposals of the Department of Public Information regarding the regionalization plan for United Nations information centres. That discussion and the establishment of regional hubs should take into account the needs of each region. A regional hub was rendered irrelevant if it only covered one Member State, he asserted. Another speaker argued that United Nations information centres carried symbolic value at the national level and spoke against closing down any of the existing centres without a proper assessment of the specific needs and conditions of each centre.

26. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information provided an in-depth response to a wide range of questions raised by delegations during the general debate, on 29 April 2004.